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Exploring the Inclusive Potential of Audio Description

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Abstract

Audio description (AD) is a key tool for improving audiovisual accessibility, originally developed to support the blind and partially sighted community. However, its benefits extend far beyond its initial target audience, with users now including individuals with cognitive disabilities, older adults, language learners, and even sighted individuals in specific contexts. This article analyzes the inclusive potential of AD, tracing the historical evolution of AD from its initial beginnings in the 1980s to the current day as a recognized form of audiovisual translation. AD translates visual information into verbal description, enabling BPS audiences to access visual media on an equal basis as sighted viewers. Apart from accessibility, AD has increasingly been appreciated as a pedagogical tool to facilitate language learning, listening skills, and vocabulary acquisition. AD is also advantageous for individuals with cognitive disabilities since it provides clear, concise descriptions of visual objects, helping to focus attention and reduce cognitive overload. It can also improve the experience for sighted users where visual access is limited, such as while driving or multitasking. This study invites further investigation of the broader applications of AD, encouraging its use in different environments, including education, virtual reality, and interactive narratives. Seen in this light, the current study highlights AD's potential to facilitate inclusivity and accessibility across society, for a wide variety of users beyond its current target ones.

Keywords: Audio description, audiovisual accessibility, blind and partially sighted, cognitive disabilities

Introduction

In the early stages of cinema, films were created as silent movies with no dialogue. In such silent films, intertitles were used to convey the narrative between scenes. These printed texts, often used to summarize the plot, could be easily translated into different languages and inserted into the film (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2014). Though these intertitles are considered an early form of audiovisual translation (AVT), it was not until the late 1920s with the emergence of talking films that the need for more formalized translation became evident (Chaume, 2012; Chiaro, 2009; Ranzato, 2016; Remael, 2013). With the introduction of sound into cinema, the process of translation became intricate, creating a new set of challenges for translators.

As an academic discipline, Translation Studies (TS) did not emerge until the latter half of the 20th century. Initially, its focus was on literary and biblical translation, while AVT was largely overlooked (Remael, 2013). The late 1950s and early 1960s marked the beginning of serious academic engagement with the interdisciplinary nature of AVT. Over the past five decades, AVT has been recognized as a distinct subfield, evolving its own theoretical frameworks separate from traditional literary models (Chaume, 2012; Romero-Fresco, 2009). This shift has led to the development of specific models and methods for different modes of AVT, such as subtitling, dubbing, and voice-over (Bassnett, 2013).

By the 1980s, AVT research began to be approached with a focus on translation theory (Orero, 2009). According to Díaz-Cintas (2008), this can be seen in the increasing availability of AVT courses at universities which encompass areas of study such as dubbing, subtitling, voice-over, and audiovisual accessibility for both deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. These training events, in association with an ever-growing number of academic conferences and symposia, have favored the expansion of interest in AVT towards a multidisciplinary brand of scholarship encompassing scholars from a wide range of fields (Díaz-Cintas, 2009). With the rapid growth of audiovisual translation, significant attention has been directed toward accessibility services such as Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (SDH) and Audio Description (AD).

The primary significance of audio description in research lies in its ability to enhance audiovisual accessibility for blind and partially sighted (BPS) audiences. However, it is important to note that BPS audiences are not the only beneficiaries of AD. Seen in this light, this inquiry focuses on how this accessibility tool also holds potential value for a wider range of users, including those with cognitive disabilities, older adults, and even sighted individuals in specific contexts, such as when consuming visual media in an audio-only format. This study, then, forms the footing for further research on the broader applications and benefits of AD. Furthermore, this study seeks to establish a foundation for future research into the evolving role of AD in diverse settings, such as education, virtual reality, and immersive storytelling, where its principles could be adapted to create more accessible and enriching experiences for a wider audiences. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of reimagining AD not only as an accessibility solution but also as a transformative medium with the potential to benefit society as a whole.

Definition of Audio Description

Although AD is new, it has established itself solidly within the field of AVT. Being a specialized variant of AVT, AD shares many characteristics with text production but also exhibits distinct features that set it apart. This is most evident in its inter-semiotic translation process, where visual information is transformed into verbal descriptions.

Linguistically, AD has been described as "the transformation of images into vivid narration" (Matamala & Orero, 2007, p. 329), or as "a verbalization of the visual codes" (Kruger, 2012, p. 70). Despite varying descriptions, these definitions share a focus on the textual dimension of AD. Seen in this light, AD can be classified under Jakobson's (1959) third type of translation: inter-semiotic translation, which is defined as "the conversion of nonverbal signs into words" (Díaz-Cintas, 2005, p. 4). Gottlieb's (1998) four communication channels – nonverbal visual, verbal-visual, nonverbal auditory, and verbal auditory – illustrate how AD converts nonverbal visual input into a verbal auditory format. Having said that, it involves more than merely describing what is seen; it aims to evoke an experience akin to what sighted audiences perceive, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.

In the broader context, AD is considered a "media access service" (Braun & Orero, 2010) that enables BPS individuals to follow visual content by filling the accessibility gap (Bourne & Hurtado, 2007; Remael, 2012). To this end, AD is essentially an enabling service: it supports inclusion and bridges the gap between the visual media and BPS audiences. This facilitates access to, and appreciation of, various types of visual content on equal terms with sighted spectators, thus realizing equality of, and participation in, culture. According to Holland (2009), AD enables the creation of inclusive environments that allow people with BPS to have equal experiences with art and media with sighted audiences.

AD provides a verbal narrative inserted during silent segments of audiovisual products, describing actions, character movements, scene transitions, and other visual elements (Ofcom, 2006). It must address five key narrative questions: where (locations), when (time of day), who (characters), what (on-screen text and sound effects), and how (action development) (Vera, 2006). These questions ensure that selection of visuals to describe is guided by elements that remain important for comprehension. The approach also dictates neutrality at all times; audio text must not be overly descriptive or interpretable, leaving the audiences to their own decisions and judgment (Braun, 2007).

A Historical Sketch of Audio Description

After introducing AD as a media access service and defining it as the umbrella term for techniques meant to make visual media accessible to the blind in the previous section, it is now necessary to present a comprehensive historical sketch of AD.

As indicated by some researchers (Benecke, 2004, p. 78; Snyder, 2020), the origins of AD can be traced back to "as old as sighted people telling visually impaired people about visual events happening in the world around them". Snyder (2020, p. 13) humorously states that the origin of AD dates back to prehistoric times: "When two sighted cavemen were munching on the same leftover saber-tooth tiger. One fellow screamed at the other, 'Look out behind you! There's a mastodon coming from the left!'". Snyder also highlights the concept of AD for "sighted individuals who happen to be looking the wrong way" (Snyder, 2020, p. 13).

Despite such anecdotal perspectives, the history of AD as a formal practice is relatively short. According to most academic accounts, its origins can be pinpointed to the early 1980s, with the United States often identified as its birthplace (Benecke, 2004; Braun, 2007; Kleege, 2016; Snyder, 2014, 2020; Vera, 2006). Earlier initiatives, however, date back to the 1970s, when Gregory Frazier, a graduate student at San Francisco State University, played a pioneering role. Frazier expanded the horizons of AD by experimenting with rapid speech between dialogue lines at the request of a blind friend. His master's thesis, titled *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: An All Video Description of the Teleplay of Blind and Visually Handicapped*, marked a landmark in the formalization of AD

guidelines (Snyder, 2020). In 1996, the *New York Times* described him as "a San Francisco visionary who hit on the idea of providing simultaneous electronic AD for the blind" (Snyder, 2020, p. 20).

Although the United States is widely regarded as the birthplace of AD, most academic research in this field comes from European countries, where AD is often studied as a form of translation (Snyder, 2020; Orero, 2005; Matamala, 2018). By the mid-1980s, AD expanded to the United Kingdom, debuting in a small theater (Snyder, 2020). Some researchers, however, suggest that a form of AD may have existed earlier, such as during the 1940s in Spain, where a radio commentator described events for blind listeners (Reviers, 2016). In these early theatrical implementations, blind audience members wore headsets to receive descriptions of scenes, characters, and their actions, delivered during natural pauses in dialogue. By this time, AD began to extend its reach to television programs and films (Benecke, 2004; Braun, 2007; Holland, 2009; Hyks, 2005; Kleege, 2016; Snyder, 2006).

In countries such as the United States, Canada, and the UK, AD initially centered on live and open theatrical performances before expanding to other forms of media (Vera, 2006). Early descriptions were delivered through separate audio tracks accessible to audiences (Kleege, 2016). Museums also began adopting AD to make exhibitions accessible to BPS visitors. The advent of digital television and commercial DVDs in the 1990s further popularized AD, transforming it into a professional and public service. The passage of the Telecommunications Act in 1996 by the U.S. Congress required the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to mandate closed captioning, indirectly fostering the development of AD (Vera, 2006). In 1997, the FCC implemented a transition schedule for distributors to increase the availability of captioned programs, laying the groundwork for AD's standardization (Vera, 2006).

The UK played a very important role in the development of descriptive styles and guidelines. In 1991, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) – today part of Ofcom – under the AUDETEL Consortium, established the ITC Guidelines to explore issues related to described programs (Snyder, 2020). These guidelines became a model for other European countries. As a response, the European Union has issued "Television Without Frontiers" directive in 1989 and then updated in 1997 to respond to US's Telecommunication Act (Vera, 2006).

Spectrum of Audio Description Audiences

As the definition of AD has pointed out, it is a "media access service". Despite this, research regarding the reception of AD produced for and by its diverse users has remained rare. It therefore becomes necessary to first establish who the BPS are, as the primary users of AD, and to discuss and differentiate the terms *impairment* and *disability*. What is more, it is important to consider other potential audiences who may benefit from or contribute to the AD production process.

The distinction between the terms *impairment* and *disability* further clarifies the issue. Disability is a subjective and variable concept, whereas impairment is a more objective and defined term (Ellis, 2016, p. 37). The World Health Organization (WHO), through the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) in 2001, defined impairment as "problems in body function or structure related to a significant deviation or loss", which can be either temporary or permanent, progressive, regressive, or static (WHO, 2014). Historically, the term impairment has carried a negative connotation, often associated with medical defects. For many years, individuals with impairments were expected to adapt to society. However, as societal attitudes shifted, it became clear that society itself needed to adapt – through improved design of environments, products, and services – to accommodate people with disabilities.

The CRPD defines persons with disabilities as individuals "who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full

and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (Ellis, 2016, p. 38). Recognizing that society is often rigid and unaccommodating, it becomes evident that poorly designed environments, technologies, education systems, and other societal components continue to hinder people with impairments.

According to Global Age Watch, in 2050 nearly one in five people in developing countries will be aged over 50 (as cited in Ellis, 2016). While many older people are not considered disabled, over 80 % of people who experience sight loss are over the age of 50 with considerable numbers being aged over 65 years (Fernández i Torné, 2016; Reviers, 2016). Consequently, there is a probable increase of AD users within the next couple of decades since 23.55% of the EU's population will reach 65-plus years in the year 2030. This is essential for those that have been experiencing a progressive loss of sensory or cognitive abilities. A point that is paramount here, though, is that these people, most of the time, do not come into the statistics count under the BPS group (Reviers, 2016). But then, again, more than 5 million partial sighted people are found within the ADLAB countries only (Maszerowska, et al., 2014; Reviers, 2016), and they also derive significant benefit from environmental, product, and service designs intended for them (Ellis, 2016). Besides, all the secondary AD benefits for both groups are no less important to ignore (Reviers, 2016).

There is, however, still no consensus between organizations of people with disabilities about how these terms ought to be used. Given the range of terminology, it is not at all surprising that the general public is often at a loss to know which terms to use. Keeping these differences in mind, we move now to the question of who constitutes the audiences for AD.

The Spanish Standardisation and Certification Association, AENOR, and the AD standard UNE 153020 state that AD is destined for people with visual impairments. However, the same standard recognizes that "people with no visual disabilities can also benefit from it" (AENOR, 2005, p. 4). There are, therefore, two different kinds of AD audiences: the primary and the secondary.

The main recipients are BPS users, who strongly rely on AD in their access to visual media. A very heterogeneous target group consists of persons who became blind from birth or at a later stage as an effect of accidents or diseases (Remael et al., 2015). As such, the BPS audiences are not homogeneous; it is made up of various subgroups, each with different levels of visual impairment and distinct ways of understanding the world (Remael et al., 2015). The other users include those who use AD as a support tool for various reasons, such as immigrants learning the language of their host country, children acquiring language skills, individuals with ADHD using AD to improve their concentration (Rai et al. 2010; Remael et al. 2015), or even those who choose not to view images for personal reasons. These are those elderly individuals who are not regarded as impaired but who nevertheless need AD, especially as they experience a natural decline in either sensory or cognitive abilities over time (Ellis, 2016; Fernández i Torné, 2016).

Primary Audiences (BPS Individuals)

Audio description is one of the most important elements in bridging the gap between visual media and visually impaired audiences, enabling individuals who are blind or partially sighted to engage more with audiovisual productions. As Poli (2009) explains, the human visual system mediates one's experience of the world, and AD bridges the gap of missing visual information by providing auditory descriptions of visual elements such as characters' actions, settings, and facial expressions. In doing so, BPS audiences can follow and understand visually dependent media, such as science documentaries, that they might otherwise be unable to fully appreciate (Schmeidler & Kirchner, 2001). In conveying such information, AD not only augments understanding but also intensifies

emotional engagement, allowing BPS audiences to connect more deeply with the narrative, particularly in emotionally charged sequences (Ramos, 2015).

The process of visualization is also another significant factor facilitated by AD since it assists BPS viewers in creating internal mental representations of scenes, characters, and events. Szarkowska and Jankowska (2012) reaffirm that particular descriptions assist in creating internal and rich representations for blind individuals regarding onscreen activity, which is a key factor in narrative access. Without such descriptions, BPS audiences would be deprived of the opportunity to visualize the story, limiting them from participating in the plot. Bardini (2020) further observes that the ability to mentally picture scenes enhances the level of immersion, enabling viewers to position themselves in the developing story. This cognitive visualization is particularly important in relation to emotional involvement since AD not only describes visual objects but also informs us about the mood of a scene. By stipulating characters' emotions, reactions, and interactions, AD facilitates greater emotional involvement on the viewer's part with the action (Benecke & Dosch, 2004; Morisset & Gonant, 2008). Vercauteren (2007) also adds that tone, pace, and expressive choices by audio describers play a significant role in the way emotional nuance is transmitted to enable BPS audiences to access the emotional content of the story.

Enhancing AD, audio introduction provides additional contextual information about audiovisual products, making it easier for BPS audiences to understand and appreciate. Fryer and Romero-Fresco (2014) and Di Giovanni (2014) note that audio introduction, often used in opera and theatre, provides factual and visual information enabling BPS audiences to gain an external overview of the content. Audio introduction may assume numerous forms, including pre-recorded or live presentations, and is particularly useful in explaining intertextual references that are often vital to the understanding of certain narratives (Federici, 2007). For instance, in films like *Midnight in Paris* (2011), audio introduction can explain allusions to famous paintings, while in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), it can explain symbolic visual details such as costumes or gestures. This additional layer of information avoids BPS audiences losing out on significant plot advancements or cultural references, and also enhances their viewing experience.

The access made possible by AD is possibly its greatest contribution in that it makes available to BPS individuals copious amounts of cultural, educational, and entertainment media which otherwise they would be unable to access. Braun and Orero (2010) note that AD enables visually impaired groups to have access to film, television, and educational video, making social inclusion possible as they are able to view the same content as their sighted counterparts. Technological advancements, such as text-to-speech systems, have also improved the production and dissemination of AD, thereby making it more accessible and affordable (Fernández-Torné, 2016). This increased accessibility to AD implies that BPS individuals will not be left behind in a world where visual communication is becoming the dominant form of communication.

AD also helps to promote equality in society by breaking media consumption barriers. Caro (2016) and Braun and Orero (2010) argue that AD helps BPS individuals participate in social and cultural life to the fullest, reducing feelings of isolation and exclusion. By making audiovisual media accessible to all, regardless of visual ability, AD facilitates a more inclusive and accessible society for all. Observe, however, the variety within the BPS community as there may be varying preferences for how AD is delivered. Chmiel and Mazur (2022) state that some BPS viewers prefer interpretative, creative descriptions and others who prefer functional, straightforward ones. What is more, Walczak and Fryer (2017) note that some viewers prefer emotionally resonant, creative descriptions, while others favor traditional, factual accounts. Seen in this light, flexibility in AD delivery is essential to meet the diverse needs and preferences of BPS audiences. Striking a balance between emotional depth and clarity is the key to the success of AD, as it ensures that all viewers can engage with the content in a way that suits their preferences (Szarkowska & Jankowska, 2012). This adaptability not only

enhances comprehension but also optimizes emotional immersion, making the viewing experience more enjoyable for BPS audiences.

Secondary Audiences

Audio Description for Language Learners

AD is an accessibility tool that translates visual information into verbal commentary, primarily aimed at blind or partially sighted people (Walczack & Fryer, 2017). While translating images into words, audio describers, on some occasions, also feel the need to include aural information that is difficult to understand (Fryer 2010) or even to explain some cultural information that is concealed in the visual information. This makes AD also useful for audiences of different ages, different social backgrounds or different cultures and even "for those who find it difficult to follow the narrative thread" (Fryer, 2016, p.171).

 In this regard, AD has gained recognition as a pedagogical tool in various educational settings. Clouet (2005) was the first to propose the use of AD as a didactic tool aimed at enhancing writing skills within English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Following this, Martínez Martínez (2012) expanded on the concept by describing how AD can facilitate the acquisition of lexical competence in language learners. Both authors focused their research on translation students, utilizing AD to assist these individuals in developing essential linguistic skills pertinent to translation tasks. Their work highlights the innovative application of AD not only as a means of making audiovisual content accessible to BPS audiences but also as a valuable pedagogical resource in language education. This intersection of translation studies and language learning underscores the versatility of AD in educational settings.

Experimental studies on AD have proliferated over the past decade, ranging from pedagogical proposals (Cenni & Izzo, 2016) to explorations of its potential for developing linguistic competences (Calduch & Talaván, 2018; Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2013), speaking competences (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2015a, 2015b; Navarrete, 2018; Talaván & Lertola, 2016), integrated skills (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2014), media literacy (Herrero & Escobar, 2018), literacy (Snyder, 2006) or accessibility awareness (Ogea Pozo, 2022). Results suggest that using AD as a pedagogical tool enhances learning in multiple ways (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2017a; Lertola, 2019; Talaván *et al.*, 2022), such as:

1. Enhanced Comprehension and Engagement: AD can significantly improve comprehension and engagement for learners by providing detailed descriptions of visual elements in multimedia content.

Several studies have provided evidence on the positive influences of AD on media content understanding by BPS viewers (Frazier & Coutinho-Johnson, 1995; Schmeidler & Kirchner, 2001) and children (Palomo, 2008). Frazier and Coutinho-Johnson (1995), for example, conducted a significant study that highlighted the effectiveness of AD in enhancing the comprehension for BPS individuals. Their research demonstrated that participants with visual impairments who viewed films supplemented with audio descriptions achieved comprehension levels comparable to those of sighted viewers. Having said that, listening to AD is advantageous for a much wider audiences including sighted viewers when it is inserted between dialogues in the film. Eardley et al. (2017) emphasized the potential of AD to enhance the experiences of both sighted and BPS individuals by stimulating imagery and creating a more immersive viewing environment. By integrating narrative information with visual content, AD fosters a multi-sensory experience that engages various senses, thereby enriching the overall comprehension of the film or artwork. This multi-sensory approach not only aids blind and visually impaired individuals in understanding and enjoying visual elements that

they cannot see but also benefits sighted viewers by providing deeper contextual insights that can enhance their engagement with the material.

Krejtz et al. (2012a) in an experimental eye-tracking study, in primary school sighted children, demonstrated that AD guides children's attention toward described objects resulting, e.g., in more fixations on specific regions of interest in educational movies. AD also sustained attention of sighted viewers resulting in a better comprehension of the movie content (Krejtz et al., 2012a). After watching audio-described educational movies, children easily retrieved visual elements of the movies than their peers who watched the clips without AD and relied more on the recognition rather than based their decisions on the elimination heuristic (Krejtz et al., 2012b). Another series of multimedia learning experiments (Krejtz et al., 2016) corroborated that AD in a group of sighted young adults facilitates focal attention (see also Velichkovsky et al., 2005) when looking at still images of visual art which in turn enhances their comprehension and engagement.

2. **Vocabulary Acquisition**: Providing detailed and contextually rich language input through AD can enhance vocabulary acquisition in foreign language learners.

In essence, AD acts as a bridge between visual information and language, providing learners with a rich and engaging way to acquire new vocabulary in a foreign language. By presenting words in context, reinforcing their meaning through repetition, and encouraging active engagement, AD supports a more effective and enjoyable vocabulary learning experience. Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen (2013), for example, assert that using AD as a pedagogical tool for language learning is highly effective, concluding that "AD is a good tool to foster lexical and phraseological competence and to make students aware of the importance of this competence as an essential part of communicative competence" (p. 56).

AD presents new vocabulary in a meaningful context, making it easier for learners to understand and remember the words. Learners can infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from the visual context and the surrounding description. For instance, an AD describing a character's facial expressions can introduce vocabulary related to emotions and reactions, allowing learners to associate words with visual cues and understand their nuanced meanings.

As AD describes the visual content, key vocabulary is often repeated, reinforcing its meaning and usage. This repetition aids in memory retention and helps learners internalize new words and phrases. For instance, if a scene depicts a historical event, AD might repeatedly use terms related to warfare, politics, or social customs, reinforcing their understanding of those concepts.

The combination of visual and auditory input in AD enhances vocabulary acquisition by engaging multiple senses and cognitive processes. Learners can associate the spoken words with the visual imagery, creating stronger connections and improving recall. This multimodal approach caters to different learning styles and preferences, making vocabulary learning more effective.

3. Development of Listening Skills: By focusing on the spoken descriptions, learners can develop their listening comprehension abilities. AD requires learners to listen attentively to the spoken descriptions in order to understand the visual content being conveyed. This focused attention on the auditory input strengthens their ability to discern sounds, identify keywords, and follow the flow of information.

In addition to the primary applications of AD for educational purposes, numerous scholars have explored its potential for developing various skills. Clouet (2005) pioneered the use of AD to enhance writing skills among translation students, recognizing its capacity to improve clarity and precision in their written work. Similarly, Cambeiro and Quereda (2007) regarded AD as a valuable tool for fostering a deeper understanding of the translation process itself, enabling students to engage more critically with the material they translate. Basic Peralta et al. (2009) further suggested that AD can

assist translators in cultivating specific competencies essential for effective AD, such as keen observation skills, the ability to articulate visual details accurately, and the use of appropriate language and register. Moreover, Ibáñez Moreno and Vermeulen (2014) demonstrated that tasks based on AD in Spanish as a foreign language classrooms can promote effective communication strategies among learners. Their earlier work in 2013 also highlighted how AD contributes to enhancing idiomaticity in language use, a finding supported by Sadowska (2016) in her study involving Polish students learning English as a foreign language. In terms of more specialized skills, Ibáñez and Vermeulen (2017b) addressed the promotion of metalinguistic competences, which can often be challenging to teach. Collectively, these studies underscore the versatility of AD as a pedagogical tool that not only aids in language acquisition but also enriches various linguistic competencies among learners.

AD for People with Disabilities

AD was originally developed to assist BPS individuals by providing a verbal narration of visual elements in audiovisual content; however, some authors and guidelines suggest, primarily on a academic basis, that individuals without visual impairments may also benefit from AD (e.g., ADLAB, 2012, p. 9; ADP, 2009, July, p. 3; AENOR, 2005, p. 6; Díaz Cintas, 2007; Remael et al., 2015, p. 17). These sources suggest that potential sighted audiences might include vulnerable and general users. AD acts as an additional layer of audio that enhances the comprehension and interaction of such viewers with the material. This audio can explain intricate scenes, character relationships, and contextual backgrounds that might have been missed otherwise and allow a more inclusive experience. This means that AD not only enriches the accessibility of audiovisual products but also enhances cognitive processing and comprehension in a diverse range of audiences, thus making the media landscape more equal.

AD is a service that greatly enhances the viewing experience of individuals with cognitive-perceptual impairments due to its structured and clear auditory narrative to accompany visual information. Apart from assisting BPS viewers, this service also provides many benefits to people with cognitive disabilities that impede them from processing visual information effectively. For instance, the *French Audio Description Charter* (Morisset & Gonant, 2008) maintains that AD could be used successfully by elderly people whose cognitive capacities are diminishing; sick people who are sometimes bothered by the rapidity of the moving image; foreigners who are learning the language; and [...] anyone who can see but who wants to listen to a film without looking at it (while driving, for example) (p. 4).

AD offers significant benefits for individuals with cognitive-perceptual challenges, including:

1. Clarification of Visual Elements

Research on information processing in the brain points out that there are two channels: visual and auditory. Therefore, it can be understood that when the brain uses both channels together, for example when AD is used, it has the potential to hold and process more new information than usual. According to Lewis (2021), AD describes visually apparent actions, settings, and expressions. This is particularly beneficial for individuals with autism spectrum disorder, who often find it difficult to interpret social cues and facial expressions. By narrating these elements, AD helps them understand the context better, thereby enhancing their overall comprehension of the content (Lewis, 2021).

2. Support for Auditory Learning

Some people learn much easier by hearing the information. It is because AD meets a learning style in which one would simply listen to things and not necessarily be distracted by everything else surrounding him. It may also turn out very vital in an educational situation when such an audio learner receives additional context from the AD and longer retains this very information.

3. Reduction of Perceptual Blindness

Perceptual blindness occurs when viewers miss out on important visual cues either because they are distracted or just not paying attention. The AD makes sure that such relevant visuals get mentioned to avoid any missing of vital information by all viewers, including those with cognitive challenges, which would be critical in following the story (Marshall et al., 2016).

4. Enhanced Engagement and Focus

AD assists in holding the attention of those who might struggle with their ability to focus or process, simplified from complex visual narratives into clear audio formats. Due to the structured nature of ADs, the experience is more immersive, in that users are able to follow along and not feel overwhelmed by the visual stimuli.

Despite the many advantages of AD, the effect of AD on the viewing experience of sighted audiences is not yet clear. One of the most central questions is whether AD is distracting for these audiences. Current empirical research into the effects of AD on sighted users is scarce and often inconclusive, making it impossible to give a straightforward answer. For instance, in their recent study *Audio Describing for an Audience with Learning Disabilities in Brazil: A Pilot Study*, Franco et al. (2015) were able to disclose the fact that though AD can be much helpful for viewers with eyesight disabilities, it may not appropriately help people with learning disabilities to fully understand the plot of a film and various narrative mechanisms. The researchers have concluded from their findings that besides AD, a further interpretation of what is implicit between images and across the images is very much required in developing access for that particular audience. Thus, each of these approaches points to a more extensive examination of how varied groups engage in AD and how much more has to be done for an inclusive watching experience.

Audio Description for Limited Screen Access

Over the decades, the field of AD has been mostly concerned with the issue of disability and accessibility of the BPS individuals and providing them with essential visual information, through which they can enrich their experience of audiovisual content. However, a considerable gap remains with the application of AD for sighted audiences who want to hear the content but do not have a screen to watch it. This emerging area is an opportunity for AD to be further utilized in different ways and to be more inclusive and far-reaching than ever before. For example, sighted users, who are multitasking like driving or cooking, could still want to listen to a film or TV show without having their eyes on the screen. Equally, in cases where screens are not visible due to technical problems or because of environmental obstacles, AD might be implemented and thereby help to maintain the audiences' attention in an unprecedented way.

AD's current practices are mainly made for BPS users, and there is emphasis on the description of the central visual components which contribute to the story articulation. While sighted audiences without screen access may share other needs, they may benefit from a more inclusive description that allows them to fully grasp the story and consequently adds to their experience. This could be done by including more AD styles that are relevant to the needs of sighted users, and this would most likely result in a better auditory experience that complements their current interaction with the medium.

Research into this area could explore how AD can be tailored for these audiences, investigating their specific needs and preferences. This includes understanding what types of visual information are most beneficial for sighted users who are unable to view the screen directly and how best to integrate these descriptions into existing media formats. By addressing this gap, stakeholders can not only broaden the audiences for AD but also foster a more inclusive media landscape that accommodates diverse viewing conditions and preferences. As such, exploring the application of AD

for sighted audiences without screen access could represent a significant advancement in the field, promoting greater accessibility and engagement across various contexts.

Conclusion

Audio description has been recognized as a major tool for BPS viewers' access to visual media on an equal footing with the sighted majority. However, as this research has indicated, the potential for AD is considerably larger than that of its niche audiences. AD possesses the immense potential for a variety of diverse users including individuals with cognitive disabilities, older adults, language learners, and even sighted individuals in specific contexts. Sealing AD back into a formative and pluralist medium involves liberating its capability for change and making an impact upon society in general.

For individuals with cognitive disability, AD offers a scripted auditory account which may assist in explaining visual data, reducing perceptual blindness, and enhancing interest and concentration. This is particularly useful for those who struggle with interpreting social cues or understanding complex visual information, such as individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Similarly, older adults who are subjected to normal decline in sensory or intellectual abilities will discover AD to be beneficial as it provides more context and explication for understanding visual media and therefore reduces the feeling of loneliness and exclusion.

Language learners constitute another category of AD consumers. Translating visual information into oral form, AD serves as a powerful pedagogical aid, enhancing vocabulary acquisition, listening, and general language proficiency. Integrating AD into learning contexts has been productive, allowing for greater multimedia interaction and supporting the development of linguistic and communicative ability. This intersection of AD and language learning emphasizes its potential to bridge educational needs and promote multilingualism.

In addition, AD can also enrich the experience of sighted individuals, particularly where visual access is not possible or limited. Multitasking users who are visually able, while cooking or driving for example, may continue to access audiovisual content with AD. Moreover, where screens are hidden due to technical or environmental constraints, AD can maintain viewers' engagement and provide an enhanced accessible viewing experience. This emerging application of AD for sighted audiences without screen access represents a significant opportunity to expand its reach and foster a more inclusive media landscape.

To this end, while AD remains an important tool for BPS audiences, its universal applicability indicates that it may be an innovatory medium for many users. Through the tailoring of AD to the diverse needs of such users, we can create more inclusive, interactive, and enriching experiences in different contexts, from learning to leisure. Continuing research and development in AD must continue to explore its potential in promoting inclusion and accessibility to allow all, regardless of capability or circumstances, to participate as fully as possible and gain maximum benefit from the immense richness of visual content.

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